

Howe (S.G.)

LAURA BRIDGMAN.



EXTRACTS

FROM THE

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LAURA BRIDGMAN.

Extract from Dr. Howe's Report for the year 1840.

There is one whose situation is so peculiar, and whose case is so interesting in a philosophical point of view, that we cannot forbear making particular mention of it; we allude to Laura Bridgman, the deaf, dumb, and blind girl, mentioned in the two last Reports.

The intellectual improvement of this interesting being, and the progress she has made in expressing her ideas is truly gratifying.

She uses the manual alphabet of the deaf mutes, with great facility and great rapidity; she has increased her vocabulary so as to comprehend the names of all common objects; she uses adjectives expressive of positive qualities, such as hard, soft, sweet, sour, &c.; verbs expressive of action, as give, take, ride, run, &c., in the present, past, and future tense; she connects adjectives with nouns to express their qualities; she introduces verbs into sentences and connects them by conjunctions; for instance, a gentleman having given her an apple, she said *man give Laura sweet apple*.

She can count to high numbers; she can add and subtract small numbers.

But the most gratifying acquirement which she has made, and the one which has given her the most delight, is the power of *writing a legible hand*, and expressing her thoughts upon paper; she writes with a pencil in a grooved line, and makes her letters clear and distinct.

She was sadly puzzled at first to know the meaning of the process to which she was subjected, but when the idea dawned upon her mind, that by means of it she could convey intelligence to her mother, her delight was unbounded. She applied herself with great diligence, and in a few months actually wrote a legible letter to her mother, in which she conveyed information of her being well, and of her coming home in ten weeks. It was indeed only the skeleton of a letter, but still it expressed in legible characters, a vague outline of the ideas which were passing in her mind. She was very impatient to have the man carry this letter, for she supposed that the utmost limit of the Post Office Department was to employ a man to run backward and forward between our Institution and the different towns where the pupils live, to fetch and carry letters. We subjoin to this Report an exact *fac simile* of Laura's writing, observing that she was not prompted to the matter, and that her hand was not held in the execution; the matter is quite original, and the chirography is entirely her own.

She has improved very much in personal appearance as well as in intellect; her countenance beams with intelligence; she is always

active at study, work, or play; she never repines and most of the time is gay and frolicksome.

She is now very expert with her needle, she knits very easily, and can make twine bags and various fancy articles, very prettily. She is very docile, has a quick sense of propriety, dresses herself with great neatness, and is always correct in her deportment. In short, it would be difficult to find a child in the possession of all her senses, and the enjoyment of the advantages that wealth and parental love can bestow, who is more contented and cheerful, or to whom existence seems a greater blessing than it does to this bereaved creature, for whom the sun has no light, the air no sound, and the flowers no color or smell.

For the method of teaching her, and for further particulars of her case, we refer you to Appendix B.

APPENDIX B.

The account given in the Report of Laura Bridgman, though sufficiently minute for conveying an idea of her situation and acquirements, is not sufficiently so for those who regard her case as interesting and important in a psychological point of view.

Such persons are assured that careful observations continue to be made, with a view to ascertaining the order of developements and the peculiar character of her intellectual faculties. The result will probably be made public, mean time, the following general observations, added to those in the last Reports, will serve to make out a general continuous history of the case.

Having mastered the manual alphabet of the deaf mutes, and learned to spell readily the names of every thing within her reach, she was then taught words expressive of positive qualities, as hardness, softness; and she readily learned to express the quality, by connecting the adjective hard on soft with the substantive; though she generally followed what one would suppose to be the natural order in the succession of ideas, placing the substantive first.

It was found too difficult, however, then to make her understand any general expression of quality, as hardness, softness in the abstract. Indeed, this is a process of mind most difficult of performance to any, especially to deaf mutes.

One of her earliest sentences after learning the adjectives was this—she had found the matron ill, and understood that her head pained her, so she said, "*Smith head sick—Laura sorry.*"

Next she was put to the positive expression of relation to place, which she could understand. For instance, a ring was taken and placed *on* a box, then the words were spelt to her, and she repeated them from imitation. Then the ring was placed *on* a hat, and a sign given her to spell, she spelt, *ring on box*—but being checked, and the right words given, she immediately began to exercise her judgment, and, as usual, seemed intently thinking. Then the same was repeated with a bag, a desk, and a great many other things, until at last, she learned that she must name the thing *on* which the article was.

Then the same article was put *into* the box, and the words *ring in box* given her—this puzzled her for many minutes, and she would make mistakes;—for instance, after she had learned to say correctly whether the ring was *on* or *in* a box, a drawer, a hat, a bucket, &c., if she were asked where is house, or matron, she would say *in box*. Cross questioning, however, is seldom necessary to ascertain whether she really understands the force of the words she is learning;—for when the true meaning dawns upon her mind, the light spreads to her countenance.

In this case the perception seemed instantaneous, and the natural sign by which she expressed it was peculiar and striking: she spelt *o n*, then laid one hand *on* the other; then she spelt, *i n t o*, and enclosed one hand *within* the other.

Some idea of the difficulty of teaching her common expressions, or the meaning of them, may be found from the fact that a lesson of two hours upon the words *right* and *left* was deemed very profitable, if she in that time really mastered the idea.

No definite course of instruction can be marked out, for her inquisitiveness is so great, that she is very much disconcerted if any question which occurs to her is deferred until the lesson is over. It is deemed best to gratify her, if her inquiry has any bearing on the lesson; and often she leads her teacher far away from the objects he commenced with.

For instance picking up a nail in one of her lessons she instantly asked its name, and it being spelt, she was dissatisfied, and thought the teacher had made a mistake, for she knew *nail* stood for her finger nail, and she was very anxious to go to head quarters, to be sure the teacher was right.

She often asks questions which unfortunately cannot be satisfactorily answered to her, for it is painful to excite such a vivid curiosity as now exists in her mind, and then baulk it. For instance, she once asked with much eagerness why one arrangement of letters was not as good as another to express the name of a thing; as why *cat* should not express the idea of the animal, as well as *cat*. This she expressed partly by signs, and partly by words, but her meaning was perfectly clear; she was puzzled and wished an explanation.

An extract from the diary kept by her instructor, will give an idea of her manner of questioning.

December 3.

"Spent one hour in giving Laura an idea of the meaning of the words left and right. She readily conceived that left hand, meant *her* left hand, but with difficulty generalized the term. At last however she caught the idea, and eagerly spelt the name of her arms, hands, fingers, feet, ears, &c., as they were touched, and named them, right or left, as might be; suddenly pausing however, and looking puzzled, she put her finger on her *nose*, and asked if that were left or right; thus she continually puzzles one; but such is her eagerness to find out one's meaning, such a zealous co-operation is there on her part, that it is a delightful task to teach her."

"Uses today freely the prepositions *in* and *on*: she says teacher sitting *in* sofa:—do not dare to correct her in such cases of anomalous usage of the preposition, but prefer to let her be in error, than shake her faith in a rule given: the corrections must be made by and by: the sofa having sides, she naturally says *in*."

In her eagerness to advance her knowledge of words and to communicate her ideas she coins words, and is always guided by analogy. Sometimes her process of *word-making* is very interesting; for instance, after some time spent in giving her an idea of the abstract meaning of *alone*, she seemed to obtain it, and understanding that being *by one's self* was to be alone, or *al-one*. She was told to go to her chamber, or school, or elsewhere and return *alone*; she did so, but soon after, wishing to go with one of the little girls, she strove to express her meaning thus, *Laura go al-two*.

The same eagerness is manifested in her attempts to define for the purpose of classification: for instance, some one giving her the word *bachelor* she came to her teacher for a definition, she was taught that men who had wives were *husbands*, those who had none, *bachelors*; when asked if she understood she said "*man no have wife-bachelor—Tenny bachelor*": referring to an old friend of her. Being told to define *bachelor*, she said "*bachelor, no have wife, and smoke pipe*." Thus she considered the individual peculiarity of smoking in one person, as a specific mark of the *species bachelor*.

Then in order to test her knowledge of the word, it was said by her teacher *Tenny has got no wife, what is Tenny?*

She paused, and then said, *Tenny is wrong!*

The word widow being explained to her, a woman whose husband is dead, and she being called upon to define she said, "*widow is woman, man dead, and cold,*" and eked out her meaning, by sinking down, and dropping her hand, to signify *in the ground*.

The two last words she added herself, they not having been in the definition: but she instantly associates the idea of *coldness* and *burial* with death.

Her having acquired any idea of death was not by the wish of her teacher, it having been his intention to reserve the subject until such a developement of her reason should be attained as would enable him to give a correct idea of it.

He hopes still, by aid of the analogy of the germination and growth of plants, to give her a consoling hope of resurrection, to counterbalance the almost instinctive dread of death.

She had touched a dead body before she came to the Institution.

She easily acquired a knowledge and use of active verbs, especially those expressive of *tangible action*; as to walk, to run, to sew, to shake.

At first, of course, no distinction could be made of mood and tense, she used the words in a general sense, and according to the order of her *sense of ideas*; thus, in asking some one to give her bread, she would first use the word expressive of the leading idea, and say "*Laura, bread, give.*" If she wanted water she would say *water, drink, Laura*.

Soon, however, she learned the use of the auxillary verbs, of the difference of the past, present and future tense; for instance, here is an early sentence, *Keller is sick—when will Keller well*; the use of *be* she had not acquired.

Having acquired the use of substantives, adjectives, verbs, prepositions and conjunctions, it was deemed time to make the experiment of trying to teach her to *write*, and to show her that she might communicate her ideas to persons not in contact with her.

It was amusing to witness the mute amazement with which she submitted to the process, the docility with which she imitated every motion, and the perseverance with which she moved her pencil over and over again in the same track, until she could form the letter. But when at last the idea dawned upon her, that by this mysterious process she could make other people understand what she thought, her joy was boundless.

Never did a child apply more eagerly and joyfully to any task than she did to this, and in a few months she could make every letter distinctly, and separate words from each other.

The following anecdote will give an idea of her fondness for teasing, or innocent fun or mischief. Her teacher looking one day unobserved into the girls' play room, saw three blind girls playing with the rockinghorse. Laura was on the crupper, another in the saddle, and a third clinging on the neck, and they were all in high glee, swinging backward and forward as far as the rockers would roll. There was a peculiarly arch look in Laura's countenance—the natural language of sly fun. She seemed prepared to give a spring, and suddenly when her end was lowest, and the others were perched high in the air, she sidled quickly off on to the floor, and down went the other end so swiftly as to throw the girls off the horse.

This Laura evidently expected, for she stood a moment convulsed with laughter, then ran eagerly forward with outstretched hands to find the girls, almost screamed with joy. As soon, however, as she got hold of one of them, she perceived that she was hurt, and in-

stantly her countenance changed, she seemed shocked and grieved, and after caressing and comforting her playmate, she found the other, and seemed to apologise by spelling the word—*wrong*, and caressing her.

When she can puzzle her teacher she is pleased and often purposely spells a word wrong with a playful look; and if she catch her teacher in a mistake, she bursts into an ecstacy of laughter.

When her teacher had been at work giving her an idea of the words carpenter, chair maker, painter, &c., in a generic sense, and told her that blacksmith made *nails*, she instantly held up her fingers and asked if blacksmith made them, though she knew well he did not.

With little girls of her own age she is full of frolic and fun, and no one enjoys a game at *romps* more than Laura.

She has the same fondness for a dress, for ribbons, and for finery as other girls of her age, and as a proof that it arises from the same amiable desire of pleasing others, it may be remarked that whenever she has a new bonnet or any new article of dress, she is particularly desirous to go to meeting, or to go out with it. If people do not notice it, she directs their attention by placing their hand upon it.

Generally she indicates her preference for such visitors as are the best dressed.

She is so much in company with blind persons that she thinks blindness common, and when first meeting a person she asks if they are blind, or she feels of their eyes.

She evidently knows that the blind differ from seeing persons, for when she shows blind persons any thing she always puts their fingers on it.

She seems to have a perception of character, and to have no esteem for those who have little intellect. The following anecdote is significant of her perception of character, and shews that from her friends she requires something more than good-natured indulgence.

A new scholar entered school—a little girl about Laura's age. She was very helpless, and Laura took great pride and great pains in showing her the way about the house, assisting her to dress and undress, and doing for her many things which she could not do for herself.

In a few weeks it began to be apparent even to Laura, that the child was not only helpless but naturally very stupid, being almost an idiot. Then Laura gave her up in despair and avoided her, and has ever since had an aversion to being with her, passing her by as if in contempt. By a natural association of ideas she attributes to this child all those countless deeds which Mr. *Nobody* does in every house—if a chair is broken, or any thing misplaced and no one knows who did it, Laura attributes it at once to this child.

It has been observed before that she is familiar with the processes of addition and subtraction in small numbers. Subtracting one number from another puzzled her for a time, but by help of objects she accomplished it. She can count and conceive objects to about one hundred in number—to express an indefinitely great number, or more than she can count she says, *hundred*. If she thought a friend was to be absent many years she would say—will come hundred *Sundays*—meaning weeks. She is pretty accurate in measuring time, and seems to have an intuitive tendency to do it. Unaided by the changes of night and day, by the light, or the sound of any timepiece, she nevertheless divides time accurately.

With the days of the week, and the week itself as a whole she is perfectly familiar; for instance, if asked her what day will it be in fifteen days more, she readily names the day of the week. The day she di-

vides by the commencement and end of school, by the recesses, and by the arrival of meal-times.

She goes to bed punctually at seven o'clock, and of her own accord. For some time after she came under our charge she had some one to put her to bed every night; but soon it was thought best to send her alone, and that she might not wait for any one, she was left alone one evening and she sat until quite late, a person watching her: and at last she seemed to form her resolution suddenly—she jumped up and groped her way up to bed. From that time to this she has never required to be told to go to bed, but at the arrival of the hour for retiring, she goes by herself.

Those persons who hold that the capacity of perceiving and measuring the lapse of time is an innate and distinct faculty of the mind, may deem it an important fact that Laura evidently can measure time so accurately as to distinguish between a half and whole note of music.

Seated at the pianoforte she will strike the notes in a measure like the following, quite correctly.



Now it will be perceived that she must have clear perception of lapse of time in order to strike the two eighths at the right instant, for in the first measure they occur at the second beat, in the second measure at the third beat.

There is no doubt that practice will enable her to sub-divide time still more minutely. Possibly some attach an undue degree of importance to this power of measuring time, considered in a metaphysical point of view, for any one may make the same experiment upon himself, and by stopping his ears and closing his eyes, will find he can measure time, or the *duration of his sensation*, and know which of two periods is longest; nevertheless we shall continue carefully to note the phenomena in the case of Laura for the benefit of whom they may concern.

It is interesting in a physiological point of view to know the effect of the deprivation of three senses upon the remaining two.

The sense of smell being destroyed, it seems a curious question whether the effect upon the organ of taste is general or particular. That is, whether the taste is blunted generally, and for all things alike, or whether one kind of savor is more effected than another; to ascertain this some experiments have been tried but as yet not enough to enable one to state confidently the results in minute distinction. The general conclusions are these.

Acids seem to make vivid and distinct impression upon the taste, and she apparently distinguishes the different degrees of acidity, better than of sweetness or bitterness. She can distinguish between wine, cider and vinegar, better than substances like manna, liquorice and sugar. Of bitters she seems to have less perception or indeed hardly any, for on putting powdered rhubarb into her mouth she called it *tea*, and on one saying *no*, and telling her to taste *close*, she evidently did try to taste it but still called it tea, and spit it out—but without any contortion or any indication of its being particularly disagreeable.

Of course she has a repugnance to these kind of experiments, and it seems almost imposing upon her good-nature to push them very far;

we shall however be soon able to ascertain certainly how far she can distinguish different sapid bodies. Those who are curious in the physiology of the taste know that the highest degree of *gusto*, or the acme of pleasure, is not obtained until just as the morsel has slipped over the glottis, and is on its way beyond power of recall down the oesophagus. This seems to be a wise precaution of nature to prevent the stomach being cheated of its due, for if the highest degree in pleasure of eating could be obtained without absolutely swallowing the morsel—the epicure could have an exhaustless source of pleasure and need never degenerate into the *gourmand*.

Some physiologists who have speculated upon this subject, consider that this final climax of the pleasure of taste is produced by a fine aroma which rising from the morsel, and mounting up the fauces pleasantly titillates the ramifications of the olfactory nerve. The fact that when we have a cold in the head, and the fauces are obstructed, the taste blunted seems to bear out this supposition; but from some observations in Laura, one would be inclined to think that some other cause must contribute to the effect.

She appears to care less for the process of mastication than deglutition; and probably it is only the necessity of mechanical trituration of food, which induces her to go through with it, before hastening to the pleasant part of swallowing. Now as the imperfection of smell impairs the taste in the tongue and palate during mastication, it should have the same effect in deglutition, supposing this theory to be correct; but it seems not to be so—else Laura would have little inducement to swallow—save to fill a vacuity of stomach. Now it seems doubtful whether the feeling of vacuity of stomach, strictly speaking, would show a child the road for the food, or whether it would not be as likely to stuff bread into its ear, as into its mouth—if it had no pleasurable sensation in tasting; and further, if the pleasurable sensation did not increase and tempt to deglutition, it is doubtful whether hunger or vacuity of stomach *alone* would teach a child to swallow the chewed morsel.

On the whole she seems to care less for eating than most children of her age.

With regard to the sense of touch it is very acute—even for a blind person. It is shown remarkably in the readiness with which she distinguishes persons; there are forty inmates in the female wing, with all of whom of course Laura is acquainted; whenever she is walking through the passage-ways, she perceives by the jar of the floor, or the agitation of the air, that some one is near her, and it is exceedingly difficult to pass her without being recognized. Her little arms are stretched out, and the instant she grasps a hand, a sleeve, or even part of the dress, she knows the person and lets them pass on with some sign of recognition.

The innate desire for knowledge, and the instinctive efforts which the human faculties make to exercise their functions is shown most remarkably in Laura. Her tiny fingers are to her as eyes, and ears, and nose, and most deftly and incessantly does she keep them in motion; like the feelers of some insects which are continually agitated, and which touch every grain of sand in the path, so Laura's arms and hands are continually in play; and when she is walking with a person she not only recognizes everything she passes within touching distance, but by continually touching her companion's hands she ascertains what he is doing. A person walking across a room while she had hold on his left arm, would find it hard to take a pencil out of his waistcoat pocket with his right hand, without her perceiving it.

Her judgment of distances and of relations of place is very accurate; she will rise from her seat, go straight towards a door, put out her hand just at the right time, and grasp the handle with precision.

When she runs against a door which is shut, but which she expected to find open, she does not fret, but rubs her head and laughs, as though she perceived the ludicrous position of a person flat against a door trying to walk through it.

The constant and tireless exercise of her feelers gives her a very accurate knowledge of everything about the house; so that if a new article, a bundle, bandbox or even a new book is laid anywhere in the apartments which she frequents, it would be but a short time before in her ceaseless rounds she would find it, and from something about it she would generally discover to whom it belonged.

She perceives the approach of persons by the undulations of the air striking her face; and she can distinguish the step of those who tread hard, and jar the floor.

At table, if told to be still, she sits and conducts herself with propriety; handles her cup, spoon, and fork, like other children; so that a stranger looking at her would take her for a very pretty child with a green ribbon over her eyes.

But when at liberty to do as she chooses, she is continually feeling of things, and ascertaining their size, shape, density, and use—asking their names and their purposes, going on with insatiable curiosity, step by step, towards knowledge.

Thus doth her active mind, though all silent and darkling within, commune by means of her one sense with things external, and gratify its innate craving for knowledge by close and ceaseless attention.

Qualities and appearances, unappreciable or unheeded by others, are to her of great significance and value; and by means of these her knowledge of external nature and physical relations will in time become extensive.

If the same success shall attend the cultivation of her moral nature, as has followed that of her intellect and her perceptive faculties, great will be the reward to her, and most interesting will be the results to others.

